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SUBJECT: JAPANESE MORNING PRESS HIGHLIGHTS 12/02/08

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3) Prime Minister's Official Residence (Kantei)

Prime Minister's schedule, December 1

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)

December 2, 2008

07:33

Took a walk around his private residence in Kamiyama-cho.

10:13

Attended a meeting commemorating the beginning of digital broadcasts

at Keio Plaza Hotel in Nishi-Shinjuku.

11:02

Visited the general store Shibuya Loft.

12:21

Held an informal meeting with reporters at the Kantei.

13:35

Met U.S. Senator Daniel Inouye and others.

14:39

Met UNESCO Executive Director Matsuura and Permanent Mission of Japan Yamamoto.

15:18

Met METI Economic and Industry Policy Bureau Director General Matsunaga. Later, met Administrative Expenditures Checkup Committee

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Chairman Motegi.

16:05

Met Nemuro Mayor Hasegawa and other members of the group calling for return of the Northern Territories.

16:40

Met at the Imperial Hotel with Economy, Trade and Industry Minister Nikai, Japan Business Federation Chairman Mitarai, and others. Attended a ceremony commemorating the 150th anniversary of the establishment of the modern steel industry.

17:09

Met Lower House member Yoshinobu Shimamura in the Diet Building. Later, attended an LDP executive meeting.

18:01

Met at the Kantei with Mitarai, Japan Chamber of Commerce and Industry Chairman Okamura, and others, with Health, Labor and Welfare Minister Masuzoe, Nikai and others.

19:12

Met Secretary General Hosoda and deputy secretaries general Ishihara and Hayashi at his official residence.

20:56

Returned to his private residence.

4) Poll: Cabinet support down to 27.5 PERCENT

SANKEI (Top play) (Abridged)
December 2, 2008

The rate of public support for Prime Minister Taro Aso's cabinet fell below 30 PERCENT, the Sankei Shimbun found yesterday from its joint poll with Fuji News Network (FNN). The Aso cabinet's approval rating was 27.5 PERCENT, showing a drop of more than 17 percentage points from its inaugural 44.6 PERCENT rating in late September. The disapproval rating rose to 58.3 PERCENT, topping the approval rating. The survey clearly shows the public's severe eye toward the prime minister.

In the survey, respondents were asked if they appreciated the Aso cabinet. To this question, 71.9 PERCENT answered "no" when they were about leadership. When it comes to what the prime minister says and does, 78.4 PERCENT gave negative answers. When asked about economic measures and foreign policy, affirmative answers accounted for only 20 PERCENT to 30 PERCENT. In addition, respondents were also asked if they thought Aso's advocacy of cash payouts would be appropriate as an economic stimulus. To this question, "yes" accounted for only 18.3 PERCENT, with "no" reaching 76.9 PERCENT.

Respondents were further asked which one between Aso and Democratic Party of Japan (Minshuto) President Ichiro Ozawa they thought was more appropriate for prime minister. Ozawa, who was overwhelmed by Aso in the past polls, stood at 32.5 PERCENT, 1 point higher than

Aso.

The survey was conducted across the nation on Nov. 29-30 after the Nov. 28 Diet debate between Aso and Ozawa. Answers were obtained from a total of 1,000 persons, who were chosen from among men and women aged 20 and over.

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5) Prime Minister Aso on poor ratings in polls: I take it humbly

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Full)
December 2, 2008

Yesterday many in the ruling and opposition parties reacted to the sharp plunge in the support rate for Prime Minister Taro Aso's cabinet in a poll jointly conducted by the Nihon Keizai Shimbun and TV Tokyo. Aso told the press corps at the Prime Minister's Official Residence (Kantei): "I have to humbly take the public's criticism." Hidehisa Otsuji, chairman of the Liberal Democratic Party's caucus in the House of Councillors, said in a strong tone: "The figure is serious. The Kantei and the ruling coalition should support the prime minister so that he will be able to display his real value."

Meanwhile, former LDP Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa commented:

"Conversely, 60 PERCENT to 70 PERCENT urged him to live up to public expectations. I don't mean to drag him down, but I want him as the representative of the people to carry out politics with plunk, zeal and readiness."

A senior New Komeito official made a specific request of the prime minister, saying: "Rather than going on the defensive, Mr. Aso should show his true character."

DPJ Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Kenji Yamaoka took the view that the Aso administration would reach a dead end. He said: "I assume that some LDP lawmakers might leave the party at around the end of the year."

6) Scope column: LDP support for Aso cooling down; Hidenao Nakagawa to form parliamentary group

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Excerpts)
December 2, 2008

The unity of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) has been weakening due to dissatisfaction toward Prime Minister Taro Aso's careless remarks and his management of economic measures. While junior and mid-level lawmakers' pressure on Aso is growing stronger, some senior LDP members are criticizing such a move. LDP lawmakers' support for Aso is now cooling down although he only took office two months ago. Conflict is intensifying in the LDP.

A group of junior and mid-level lawmakers, including former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki, who called on the government to submit a second supplementary budget for fiscal 2008 to the current Diet session, has been actively making its own independent move.

Shiozaki and former administrative reform ministers Yoshimi Watanabe and Toshimitsu Motegi held a meeting also on the night of Nov. 26, and the three agreed to continue to propose Aso policy measures for economic and social security issues. On Nov. 21 when the group called on the Prime Minister to submit the second extra budget to the ongoing session, the number of the members was 24. After that, about 10 lawmakers reportedly asked to join the group, according to group members.

Former LDP Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa, who draws a line with Aso regarding economic policy, will form a parliamentarian group on

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Dec. 5. Watanabe and former Defense Minister Yuriko Koike are expected to join the group.

On his website, Nakagawa expressed his opposition to a policy of curbing the natural increase in social security costs by 220 billion yen. Although he emphasizes priority on policy over politics, there seems to be no doubt that his motives are suspicious.

However, a senior LDP official, who has close ties to Aso, has strongly criticized anti-Aso moves, arguing: "In the presidential election, a majority of the LDP lawmakers supported Mr. Aso, and the Aso cabinet was inaugurated. They should be aware of what they should or should not do." Aso's aide is alarmed by Nakagawa's move, saying: "It's an odd parliamentary group."

7) LDP leadership alarmed at spread of criticism against Aso, seeing lawmakers forming new groups

YOMIURI (Page 4) (Excerpts)
December 2, 2008

Aides to Prime Minister Aso and Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) executives are now worrying about a spread of moves against Aso within the party. Aso was expected to be a "face" of the next House of Representatives election because of his popularity among the general public, but an increasing number of mid-ranking and junior party members have become critical of the prime minister due to his series of gaffes. Meanwhile, some lawmakers have reacted to such criticism of the administration. An awkward atmosphere is thus sweeping across the party.

Public support for Prime Minister Aso dropped 17 percentage points from the previous poll in late October to 31 PERCENT in an opinion survey conducted by the Nikkei and TV Tokyo. Asked about this poor result last night, Aso told reporters at the Prime Minister's Office: "I think we should accept public criticism with humility."

But former State Minister in Charge of Administrative Reform Yoshimi Watanabe, a leading critic of Aso, said before reporters in Tokyo last night: "(The prime minister) has lost (political ground). People are now feeling uneasy. It would be the best way for the government to hold a general election at an early date and form a crisis-management cabinet."

The party leadership has been alarmed at moves by "a group of like-minded lawmakers to seek the smooth implementation of policy measures" established last month and composed of 24 mid-ranking and junior party members, including Watanabe and former Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuhisa Shiozaki. The group proposed to the prime minister that a fiscal 2008 second supplementary budget bill be submitted to the current Diet session, but their request was rejected. The group intends to proactively make policy proposals.

Former Secretary General Hidenao Nakagawa, who distances himself from Aso, also plans to launch a parliamentary league on reforming the nation's social security system on Dec. 5. Since Watanabe and former Defense Minister Yuriko Koike, who is close to Nakagawa, have decided to join the new group, observers have seen it as an anti-Aso group.

8) DPJ President Ozawa: Aso administration will not last long

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TOKYO SHIMBUN (Page 2) (Full)
December 2, 2008

Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) President Ichiro Ozawa told reporters yesterday in Kumagaya City, Saitama Prefecture: "I wonder how long the Aso administration will exist as is. I don't think it will last long." He took the view that Prime Minister Taro Aso would be forced to carry out an early dissolution of the House of Representatives or to resign en masse with his cabinet.

Ozawa also said:

"If the Aso cabinet resigns en masse, it will be impossible for the Liberal Democratic Party and New Komeito to take the reins of

government again. If the next cabinet conducts a general election, many parties (including the LDP and New Komeito) will be able to reach an agreement."

9) LDP to vote on bill on reexamining postal privatization, aiming at enactment of financial bill

YOMIURI (Page 4) (Excerpts)
December 2, 2008

A vote is now likely to be taken in the current Diet session on a bill to reexamine postal privatization submitted by the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), the Social Democratic Party, and the People's New Party (PNP). The bill proposes freezing the sale of government-held shares in Japan Post group companies. It was adopted in the House of Councillors in December of last year, but no conclusion has been reached in the House of Representatives.

Liberal Democratic Party Diet Affairs Committee Chairman Tadamori Oshima met with his counterparts Kenji Yamaoka of the DPJ and Masaaki Itokawa of the PNP in the Diet Building yesterday and indicated that the LDP would agree to take a vote on the bill in the ongoing Diet session. He said: "We will not take a strategy to kill the bill by means of carrying deliberations over to the next session or reaching no conclusion at the Diet Affairs Committee." The LDP is aiming to pave the way for a vote on a bill amending the Law for Strengthening Financial Functions. But Oshima stopped short of referring to when the bill would be voted on, just saying: "Consultation is now underway in the LDP."

Taking into consideration the PNP's insistence on a vote on the said bill during the current session, the DPJ has asked the ruling camp to vote on the bill prior to a vote on the financial bill.

10) EPA with ASEAN goes into effect: Pact to boost division of labor in region; Challenge is enactment of EPA in entire region at early date

YOMIURI (Page 9) (Full)
December 2, 2008

The Economic Partnership Agreement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) went into effect on December 2. The pact is expected to boost Japan's auto parts exports and make the division of labor in the region easier. However, in the initial phase, the agreement has been enacted only with Singapore, Vietnam, Laos and Burma. In order for the multilateral pact to function, it is essential for agreements with the remaining six countries, including

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Thailand and Malaysia, to be enacted at an early date.

This is the first enactment of a multilateral EPA for Japan. The EPA with all ASEAN members will serve to complement bilateral EPAs. Under the agreement, Japan will scrap within 10 years 93 PERCENT of tariffs imposed on the total value of imports, such as shrimp and tropical fruits, except for rice and dairy products. ASEAN will make 91 PERCENT of tariffs on the total value of imports, such as auto parts, duty-free.

For instance, the duty-free system or low tariff rates will be applied to a case in which Japan exports liquid crystal panels to Malaysia to be assembled there and exports the finished products to Thailand. Japanese companies would find it easier to set up a labor-division system in the region, including building assembly plants there.

Among 10 ASEAN members, bilateral EPAs with five countries, including Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia, have already been enacted. Japan has signed an EPA with the Philippines. A basic agreement has been reached with Vietnam.

However, apart from bilateral EPAs, it is necessary for each country to go through procedures for the enactment of the EPA involving all ASEAN members. All member nations have already signed the EPA. However, procedures for enactment are way behind due to each

member's domestic situation.

The likelihood is that the EPA with all ASEAN members will be not enacted until at least next year due to the impact of the unstable political situation in Thailand.

Japanese companies will not be able to receive full benefits of the pact until it goes into effect in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia, where Japanese companies' auto and home electronics plants are centered.

Given the situation in which it is already possible to distribute some products, such as LCDs, duty free in ASEAN, where deregulation is being promoted, what effect the EPA will bring about is unclear under the present circumstance, as chief researcher Junici Sugawara at the Mizuho Research Institute noted.

11) Obama's foreign policy team announced; Time for review of Japan-U.S. relations

MAINICHI (Page 2) (Abridged slightly)
December 2, 2008

Katsumi Kawakami, Ryo Matsuo

In reaction to the announcement of the lineup of the foreign policy team for the administration of U.S. President-elect Barack Obama, the Japanese government intends to convey its concern for the possible deterioration of Japan-U.S. relations to the new U.S. administration at an early stage, according to Administrative Vice-Foreign Minister Mitoji Yabunaka. Looming in the backdrop is Tokyo's alarm at the assumption of the post of secretary of state by Hillary Clinton, who seems to be placing high priority on China in Asian diplomacy. At the same time, it is a fact that Japan-U.S. relations which have relied heavily on the Koizumi-Bush personal relationship require a review at this point in time. Japan's

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capability to build new cooperative relations centering on the environment, energy and other areas will be tested.

A senior government official who recently visited the United States said: "The United States' interest is centered on the rise of fundamentalist Muslim forces, such as India, and Russia." East Asia, including Japan, is faced with unstable factors, such as the North Korean nuclear issue and China's growing defense spending. The Japanese government is strongly alarmed that a drop in the United States' interest in East Asia might end up destabilizing the region.

Prime Minister Taro Aso had a telephone conversation with President-elect Obama on Nov. 7 in which the two leaders agreed to strengthen the Japan-U.S. alliance. Obama also expressed his eagerness to build personal relations of trust. Democratic Senator Daniel Inouye, who is of Japanese descent, met with Prime Minister Aso yesterday, and noted: "Mr. Obama will continue friendly U.S.-Japan relations."

Dealing with President Obama will not be so easy, however. Prime Minister Aso's wish to meet with him in November did not materialize. Compared with the Republican administration, the new administration might be less intimate with Japan.

Moreover, Hillary Clinton, who will become the new secretary of state, clearly places high priority on China. Japan is alarmed at a possible repeat of the so-called Japan-passing syndrome it had experienced during the Clinton administration (1993-2001).

Vice-Foreign Minister Yabunaka in a press conference yesterday strongly denied the view that the next U.S. administration would slight Japan, saying: "The United States thinks the alliance and cooperation with Japan is important. Whoever becomes the new secretary of state, there is no concern that (the United States) will bypass Japan."

At the same time, the Aso administration is quickly losing momentum

in the ruling camp. It is questionable if the Aso administration can immediately respond to pressing issues, such as the financial crisis, in concert with the new U.S. administration due to be launched in January. Given the likelihood that the United States will lean toward China, a government official has begun taking a precaution, saying: "It is desirable for Japan, as well, for the United States to strengthen relations with China."

Further, there is a possibility that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who will retain his post, will ask Japan for new cooperation other than the refueling mission in the Indian Ocean.

12) Presence of Senator Inouye to become increasingly important as "go-between" for Japan

YOMIURI (Page 4) (Full)
December 2, 2008

Visiting Senator Daniel Inouye of the U.S. Democratic Party met with Prime Minister Aso at the Prime Minister's Office yesterday afternoon. The Japanese-American senator is a Democratic heavyweight and is known as one of the foremost pro-Japanese members in U.S. Congress. His Japan visit is aimed to exchange views with Japanese leading figures prior to the launch of an Obama administration.

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In meeting with Aso, Inouye emphasized: "Japan-U.S. relations will remain firm under the Obama administration." Aso replied: "President-elect Obama fully knows of Asian affairs. I hope my administration and the next U.S. administration will strengthen Japan-U.S. relations."

As a Liberal Democratic Party member said: "Japan has few connections with U.S. Congress, in particular, with the Democratic Party," establishing a network of personnel ties with the Obama administration is one of Japan's top priority tasks. The presence of Inouye, who is expected to assume in January the chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee with enormous authority in budgetary deliberations in the U.S. Senate, will become increasingly important for Japan.

13) Radiation preventive drugs in Yokosuka stores

TOKYO SHIMBUN (Top play) (Abridged)
Eve., December 1, 2008

In Kanagawa Prefecture's Yokosuka City, where the USS George Washington, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier of the U.S. Navy, is based, stable iodine tablets, which are said to be effective to prevent radiation in nuclear disasters, have been sold since October this year after the carrier's arrival. Yokosuka City stores stable iodine tablets in preparation for nuclear disasters. However, the Health and Welfare Ministry bans them from being advertised. As it stands, the city remains unable to inform its residents of the tablets in stores.

Yokosuka City, which stores about 300,000 stable iodine tablets, is prepared to distribute them to its residents at refuges should a disaster occur in a nuclear-powered ship's accident. However, the Nuclear Safety Commission of the government notes that the efficacy of stable iodine tablets will decrease six hours after taking them. A group of local residents therefore persuaded local drugstores to stock stable iodine tablets, emphasizing the need for local people to keep them at their homes. Several stores agreed and began selling the tablets.

But the Health and Welfare Ministry classifies stable iodine tablets as medicine for hospital use. The ministry allows drugstores to sell the tablets to a minimum necessary extent through a pharmacist over the counter. In addition, the ministry prohibits advertisements. "We're not allowed to advertise, so we have no choice but to wait until people who know this to come," said a pharmacist at a drugstore that has started selling the tablets.

Municipalities with nuclear power plants store stable iodine

tablets, based on the Nuclear Safety Commission's disaster prevention guidelines for nuclear facilities. Some municipalities act as go betweens for drugstores and residents.

14) G-8 ministerial meetings called off one after another; Japanese diplomacy affected by conflict between Russia and U.S., European countries

NIKKEI (Page 2) (Abridged slightly)
December 2, 2008

As the chair of this year's Group of Eight (G-8) Summit, Japan was

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scheduled to host many G-8 ministerial meetings before the end of the year. But they have been effectively called off one after another. Although the government cited the global financial crisis and other factors, the cancellations are in fact ascribable to the reluctance of the United States and some European countries that have been increasingly at odds with Russia since the Georgia conflict. The conflict between the two sides has taken a toll on Japanese diplomacy.

Japan was scheduled to host a G-8 energy forum and a G-8 agricultural ministerial before year's end based on an agreement reached at the Lake Toya Summit in July. But the government has decided to postpone them for the time being. The chair of the summit will shift to Italy in January. As such, even if the timetables are worked out, it would be difficult for Japan to host those events.

A government official explained why it has given up hosting the events: "Many cabinet ministers would not be able to attend them due to the drastically changed global economy triggered by the financial crisis and the international political situation."

According to some government sources, however, the United States and some European countries have asked Japan to put off those events with an eye on the conflict with Russia over Georgia and other matters. They also indicated that France, the chair of the European Union (EU), and UK were also reluctant to attend the events.

SCHIEFFER